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January 14th, 2009

TO: Chairman Noonan and Members of the House Federal Relations, Energy, and Telecommunications Committee

FROM: Ed Eaton, Volunteer Advocate, AARP Montana

RE: HB 27 – Revise Universal Systems Benefit laws

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee my name is Ed Eaton, volunteer advocate for AARP Montana. AARP Montana is committed to helping our 165,000 members and all limited-income Montanans afford their energy costs. I have been working with the USB program since its inception, and along with AARP Montana strongly support its continuation.

Deregulation has created many terrible consequences for consumers all over this state. In a survey of AARP members all over the state, 70% believed that deregulation hurt them. Fortunately, deregulation did have one good component – the universal system benefits program. Universal system benefits programs helps people of all incomes throughout Montana. People in poverty are helped through bill assistance and weatherization, middle and upper income people are given energy audits and rebates on energy efficient appliances. And everyone is able to fund development of clean, reliable, renewable energy. For the cost, universal system benefits programs are really an advantage for everyone.

Many elderly Montanans live in their same homes for many years. Now in retirement and living on fixed incomes, their healthcare costs are too high to allow them to invest in home improvements. Their energy burden is a product of their environment, not of their lifestyle. The USB program helps them both pay for their bills and improve their homes.

Through the USB Programs, millions of dollars are routed to energy costs and energy conservation measures: now, at a time of recession and rising energy costs, it is absolutely imperative that they are not allowed to expire.

Again, high energy costs are a major concern for Montanans. The USB programs help to fight these costs and AARP Montana strongly urges you to keep them in place by passing House Bill 27. Thank you for your time.